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ABSTRACT

The terms "meaning" and "significance," as they relate to literary criticism, are considered in the first section of this paper. The paper then examines the meaning of "hermeneutics," the classical discipline concerned with the understanding of texts; introduces the "isomorph" construct; and demonstrates the relationship between the two through a discussion of the most common relation within the text, the relation of the part to the whole. Finally, the paper discusses isomorphic core concepts and posits that isomorphy is the basis of general hermeneutics, that the study of texts is a study of the relation of parts within and without the text, and that such a study is based on the belief that these features reflect some arrangements in the "real world." (GW)

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MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE: THE HERMENEUTIC AS ISOMORPH

First, I would like to say how much I enjoy being in such
outstanding company--Professors Hirsch and Kinneavy are among the very
best in our field, and I find it thrilling to be on a panel with them
both.

I shall address the broader session title by discussing my
title: Meaning and Significance: The Hermeneutic as Isomorph. On to
"thematic tags. "

Part One: Meaning and Significance

The first two major terms, meaning and significance, are well-
worn words. Sinn und Bedeutung mean more than what we customarily
intend in expressions such as "What's the meaning of this?" or "What's
the significance of the appropriations bill?" Yet the distinction
implied in those two examples is and will continue to be basic. In
the sense of literary criticism, and in the tradition of general
hermeneutics (more on that very nice word later), meaning is often
linked to textual and contentual frames and significance to contextual
and extensional frames. While it is obvious that these frames overlap,

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the distinction is important; it is important because the tensions which result from text-context and content-extent are crucial in any form of critical, evaluative reading. Critical, evaluative reading involves interpretation. The manner and form in which tensions within a work and between the text and the larger context exist are important to us. (Mr. Kinneavy's talk will involve some considerations of larger contexts, so I'll not discuss this point further.)

Some people have tied meaning to the author and significance to the reader. That simple division (by the way, of a very complex dimension) is worthwhile in one especially important way: diverse interpretations of the same work can be explained very easily within this brief formula. From this has come what Mr. Hirsch called, in his latest book, the apparent "ultimate victory of the Protestant spirit," which he calls a "direct consequence of transgressing the fundamental ethical norms of speech and its interpretation." My time here is too short and it would not suit my aim to shoot at the book-lined barn of arguments for and against consideration of mens auctoris.

but I shall digress twice (briefly) to make two points:

A. Without a doubt and without regard to theories of interpretation, it is evident that no reader ever gained the meaning of a text, whatever it is construed to be, before reading the text. *And, more seriously —*

B. The following statement seems to me to be meaningful:

...symbols find their referents in the semantically dense range of all possible meanings and connotations. When the poet designates the appropriate connotations, he has selected a "position" in this dense range and his problem is to find an appropriate symbol in the articulate and discontinuous range of words to render the desired connotation.

And since I find that meaningful, I am saying that an author is naturally concerned with and attentive to both Meaning and Significance. The writer is concerned with matters of part and whole, text and context, context and extension. The writer works knowingly within a discourse range; considerations of this discourse range are basic to hermeneutical inquiry. A reader can ill afford to consider personally grounded significance at the expense of considerations of mens auctoris.

Part Two: The Hermeneutic as Isomorph

The third major term, hermeneutic, is used here in the singular -s less form (the more frequently used form in English is the -s form, hermeneutics, which is still singular). I chose this form for two reasons: I was conscious of the potential problem a reader might have with "hermeneutics as isomorph," and I wished to use a term which called to mind the conceptual nature of the tradition known as general hermeneutics. I intend to stay away from a discussion of the "Hirsch-Gadamer" split in hermeneutical theory.

Hermeneutics is "the classical discipline concerned with the understanding of texts."

Hermeneutics is a conceptual/thematic tag attached to a study which by its very nature is multidisciplinary.

The last major term is "isomorph." For the purposes of this presentation I am considering "isomorph" a construct which is useful as

a) heuristic, b) organizing pattern of discourse, and c) focus of interpretation; this is valid, I believe, since isomorph is a construct derived from interdisciplinary considerations of discourse, patterns, and theoretical rules of discovery regardless of discipline.

The essential relationship between theories of composition and theories of interpretation is provided by and comprehensible within the concept "isomorphy." My purpose in the remaining part of this paper is to demonstrate to you the relation^{/ship} between "hermeneutic" and "isomorph." I shall use for this purpose the most common relationship within the text, the relation of the part to the whole.

The part and the whole. I. A. Richards wrote not long ago, "In almost all learning, the control of part by whole and of whole by part is, or should be, reciprocal." Drawing on Pierce's type-token distinction Richards goes on to present a SIT/sit, sit discussion that is similar to the so-called hermeneutic circle. Mr. Hirsch, in the first talk of this session, presented ideas based on psycholinguistic

researches which support the importance of the summing of connections and meaning within larger units. For most of us, the agreed upon dimensions of the part-whole relationship are tied to our understanding of the term "Gestalt."

Cassirer stated:

...it is fundamentally impossible to dissect the unity of an expressive phenomenon...into a sum, however great, of phenomena whose parts would be identical with the parts of the phenomenon in which we perceive the body....

Richards concluded his recent article with three principles of meaning within discourse. Of these three, the first directly relates to the point here:

...meanings depend on the meanings of other words surrounding them in the setting as well as upon factors in the ambience. What should be brought out is how what a word does is changed by a change made elsewhere in the passage.

This last point has now been the focus of some intriguing research by Ilya Prigogine, who now postulates within human discourse

situations an activity that is definable and predictable in a manner commensurate with the laws of dissipative mechanics. (Dissipative mechanics is a study within the discipline of thermodynamics.)

Dissipative mechanics, among other things, attempts to describe and predict alterations in stable and quasi-stable situations (molecules, compounds, fields) which result from change or insult to the situations. I shall return to Prigogine's conclusion later, but first two other points about the part-whole relationship must be presented.

First: the domains carved out by both camps of Speech Act theorists are centered on a) the relationship of a work (token) to a work (type) and b) the relationship of structures, meanings, and intents within a work to the overall structure, meaning, and purpose of the work. Much of speech act theory is a working out of basic and ad hoc patternings of the part-whole relationship.

Second: a listing of isomorphs will be a listing of basic ways in which parts relate to the whole. I shall return to this point, and in doing so move directly to my paper's conclusion, after I pick up Mr. Prigogine's conclusion.

When Prigogine discovered in human communication situations a phenomenon which he had researched and worked with in thermodynamics he moved at once to a postulation based on isomorphy. He related a pattern from one discipline to another. He demonstrated in another stadium the validity of Boltzman's statement:

Nature seemed, as it were, to have built the most diverse things exactly according to the same plan, or, as the analytic mathematician says dryly--the same differential equations hold for the most diverse phenomena.

Part C: Isomorphs and isomorphy

Richard Coe at the Philadelphia meeting (1976) of the Conference on College Composition and Communication presented a list of seven isomorphic core concepts. The list was:

- 1.) Figure/ground
- 2.) Form/function (or, form/content)
- 3.) Cause-effect
- 4.) Invariance (specific instance: symmetry)
- 5.) Equilibrium
- 6.) Evolution (orderly change of parts within system/environment)
- 7.) Isomorphy

Note, please, that the first six isomorphs are concerned with part-whole relationships or with patterning in part-whole relationships. (In Frank D'Angelo's paper yesterday the principal ontological argument offered was based upon the significance of isomorphic concepts identified above as "Evolution" and "Equilibrium.") But where does the seventh, isomorphy, fit it?

Any listing of isomorphs would have to begin or end (or both) with the positing of "isomorphy" as an isomorph. As "concept" (which itself is a constructed frame, a "concept") is crucial to any listing/discussion of a list of concepts, isomorphy is the crux of a list of isomorphic core concepts.

What Coe posited in an interdisciplinary sense, I posit now in rhetorical terms: "isomorphy," that crucial isomorph, is the basis of general hermeneutics; the study of texts is a study of the relation

of parts to the whole within and without the text, and this study is predicated upon the belief that these features reflect some arrangements in the "real world."

In terms of the session title, the relationship of theories of composition to theories of interpretation, I say the relationship is comprehended by the tradition of hermeneutical studies; specifically, the relation between the two sets of theories exists in the isomorphic core concepts which studied rhetorically allow me to postulate that the interaction among inventio, dispositio, and elocutio leads to an understanding of the interaction among invention, discourse organization, and interpretation.